

The Hammacher Schlemmer Story

1848 – 1980

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Chronology of Events.....	20
The Song.....	22
Owners of Hammacher Schlemmer.....	26
Locations of The Hammacher Schlemmer Main Store.....	28
Firms.....	27
Royalty, Presidents, Political Leaders, Movie and Entertainment Celebrities.....	27

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Table of Contents

Chronology of Events.....	20
The Song.....	22
Owners of Hammacher Schlemmer.....	26
Locations of The Hammacher Schlemmer Main Store.....	26
Firsts	27
Royalty, Presidents, Political Leaders, Movie and Entertainment Celebrities.....	27

Chronology of Events

1848

In the late 1840s, William Tollner opened a small hardware business, located at 221 The Bowery in New York City. Although Hammacher Schlemmer is not sure of the exact year, 1848 is used because that is the date of the firm's oldest records.

1853

William Schlemmer, then only 12 years old, arrived by boat at New York's Ellis Island from Germany, with only his uncle's name, William Tollner, in his pocket. One week later, he was employed at his uncle's hardware store, selling tools from the sidewalk in front.

1859

After investing \$5,000 in Tollner's business, Alfred Hammacher was admitted to the firm. The name was changed to Tollner and Hammacher and the store moved to 209 The Bowery, where it remained until 1904.

In the early Civil War period, pre-1862, the government allowed merchants to mint their own coins, which they used to make change. Tollner and Hammacher, 209 Bowery, New York, issued these "copper heads" or "rebellion tokens", which were minted with the name of the store and were redeemable only there. This special minting was halted in 1864.

Later in the 1860s, Hammacher Schlemmer began its mail order business.

1867

William Schlemmer was appointed a partner at Tollner and Hammacher. He slowly purchased his uncle's shares in the firm and after Tollner died, he changed the name to Hammacher, Schlemmer & Company.

1878

The first New York telephone directory appeared with 271 subscribers including Hammacher and Company at 209 Broadway. The Bell Telephone Company of New York misspelled Hammacher by dropping the second "m".

1881

Hammacher Schlemmer files show a copy of a photograph of an 1881 Hammacher and Company catalogue. Apparently this is the first catalogue showing the company's products.

1883

The business took the name Hammacher Schlemmer and Company.

1885

Alfred Hammacher, who was an investor who did not take an active part in the firm, sold most of his interest in the company in 1885 to William Schlemmer.

Hammacher returned to Germany to live. His heirs, who also lived abroad, kept a small part in the business.

1893

William F. Schlemmer, son of the owner, began working in the store at age 15.

1898

Hammacher Schlemmer & Company was incorporated. William F. Schlemmer became Vice-President and a director of the company.

1899

Hammacher Schlemmer began selling automotive parts and automotive tools when there were only 600 cars in New York.

1900

Hammacher Schlemmer & Company had the largest inventory of tools and hardware in the East by this date. The store was handsomely furnished and maintained large stocks of items for prompt shipment to factories and merchants.

1904

Hammacher Schlemmer & Company moved to a large building at 13th Street and Fourth Avenue. It then spread into three smaller warehouses in that neighborhood and then into the top floor of Luchow's Restaurant.

1912

After four years of intermittent work by three employees, a 1,000- page definitive catalogue of the Hammacher Schlemmer stock was completed. It was full of engravings of swags, saw gummier, plumb bobs, mortise gages, pin punches, and finer gouges.

1914

William F. Schlemmer became President of Hammacher Schlemmer & Company.

1916

William F. Schlemmer inherited the business from his father who died that year at age 76.

Also that year, Schlemmer negotiated a deal with the Russian government for every nut and bolt and small metal object in the store. Later, employees of

the store speculated that the Russian government was preparing for the Bolshevik revolution and planned to use the hardware for shrapnel.

1920

An advertising campaign featuring whimsical gnomes carrying tools became trade symbols of Hammacher Schlemmer & company during the 1920s. This feature was dropped in 1926 because it was believed that New Yorkers associated the gnomes with the hardware aspect of the business. (Later the gnomes were reinstated.)

In the 1920s, catalogue No. 600 was issued. In 1971 that catalogue was still used as a reference book by the Naval Supply Depots.

Also in the 1920s, Hammacher Schlemmer had many salesmen traveling throughout the U.S, east of the Mississippi, and in Canada.

1926

The firm moved to its present location, a twelve-story building at 147 East 57th Street. The downtown store on 13th Street was initially maintained but eventually was closed. About \$70,000 was spent to fit the new place as a hardware shop but business from a concentration of carpenters located near by did not materialize. Shortly after the move, William F. Schlemmer transferred all the tools and hardware into the basement and stocked the rest of the new store with luxury items.

1929

The final years of the 1920s, according to cosmopolitan magazine (February 1979) "...ushered in an era of Hammacher Schlemmer elegance. Each morning before opening time, uniformed porters dusted every inch of glass shelving with chamois. A doorman in tailcoat stood ready to hand customers in and out of their limousines. The staff was required to dress in dark suits and starched white collars".

In 1929, Dominic Tampone joined the firm as a stockboy. Also this year, the tune "Hammacher Schlemmer, I Love You" by Howard Dietz was featured in the first "Little Show", a Broadway musical. The tune was very catchy and soon swept the country. Fred Allen sang the song in the show, which also starred Clifton Webb and Libby Holman.

Following is the Chorus of "Hammacher Schlemmer, I Love You":

Hammacher Schlemmer, I Love You
You're Like A Sweetheart To Me
Hammacher Schlemmer, Above You
No Other Firm E'er Could Be.
Your Business Deserves Devotion That Is Loyal
I Love You Just Like A Fellow Loves His Gail
So Always Remember, Hammacher Schlemmer, I Love You.

(From the Theme Song of "The Little Show", New York, 1929)

other words to the song include:

Hammacher Schlemmer, I Love You
Roebuck and Sears, I Adore You
If You Want to Buy a Bassinet or Buy a Hog
Don't Be in a Fog, Use Our Catalogue
Hammacher Schlemmer You're Sweet Dear
Hammacher Schlemmer I Repeat Dear
Macy's And Gimble's Have Plenty of Thimbles
But I Love You.

1931

Hammacher Schlemmer mailed out its first housewares catalogue, which was also the first of its kind in the housewares field.

A copy of the January-February, 1931, catalogue contained 59 items including an eight-cup Electric Silex coffee maker for \$13.95. Hand drawn illustrations and prices accompanied all items. The most expensive was an electric kitchen ventilator fan for \$65, installation for \$7.00. The least expensive item was a rubber play bone for your pet dog.

The catalogue had some other interesting aspects. Hammacher Schlemmer used a slogan: "The House of Fine Housewares" and inside there was a notice that, "Three New Yorkers, Inc. and Miss Lillian Lovell formerly of 8 W. 47th Street are now affiliated with "The House of Fine Housewares". Three New Yorkers is the name of the Hammacher Schlemmer division which manufactured closet accessories. Miss Lillian Lovell owned the operation before it was acquired by Hammacher Schlemmer.

1935

Hammacher hired Miss Palmer as the store's first female salesperson.

Sometime after 1935, Hammacher Schlemmer hired the star salesman, William G. Lennon, from Lewis & Conger. Eventually, Hammacher Schlemmer acquired Lewis & Conger.

1938

By 1938, the 13th Street store and the downtown warehouse had been shut down. The wholesale hardware and mail-supply departments also had been reduced.

1945

After William F. Schlemmer's death in 1945, his wife, Else F. O. Schlemmer, took over the firm and ran it until 1953.

1948

Hammacher Schlemmer celebrated the 100th anniversary of its birth.

1953

Else Schlemmer retired and Hammacher Schlemmer was sold to a syndicate headed by Henry Broido who was a buyer for Gimble Brothers.

1955

Due to direct sales from tool and hardware manufacturers to their customers, Hammacher Schlemmer & Company discontinued its hardware department and began to focus on luxury items. Store officials point out that luxury was never the only criteria. They say 98% of the items are functional, unusual, high priced, and are known for their novelty. The company also became known for taking a chance on new inventions.

A new syndicate headed by John Gerald, a well-known interior decorator, purchased Hammacher Schlemmer in 1955.

1956

Else Schlemmer died and willed \$473,000 to employees of Hammacher Schlemmer.

1959

Dominic Tampone became president after having worked his way up from the position of stock boy.

1960

Chester H. Roth, chairman of Kayser-Roth Corporation, purchased Hammacher Schlemmer from the Gerald Group. Kayser-Roth was then the country's biggest apparel conglomerate.

1961

Hammacher Schlemmer offered a regulation size bowling alley for \$4,300.00 and \$8,000.00 for two lanes.

Hammacher Schlemmer started Invento products, a wholesaling subsidiary.

1962

In March of 1962, Hammacher Schlemmer announced the expansion of its wholesale division, Invento Products Corporation. The Invento line included 50 housewares and gift items.

At this time, Hammacher Schlemmer listed the following retailers as customers of the Invento division: Marshall Field, Neiman Marcus, Abercrombie & Fitch, Saks Fifth Avenue, Lord and Taylor, Woodward & Lothrop, and Harrods of London.

1964

Hammacher Schlemmer sold 24 used London Taxi Cabs at \$1,895 a piece.

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1965

Hammacher Schlemmer designed furnishings for 17 closets of presidential family guesthouse, The Blair House in Washington, D.C.

Hammacher Schlemmer acquired Plummer McCutcheon adding its lines of fine linens and crystal.

Also this year, the Long Island City operation was initiated. This facility now contains the Three New Yorkers manufacturing divisions, warehouse, order processing and offices.

1967

Hammacher Schlemmer experimented with selling Invento items at Invento Cupboards (10 feet by 2 feet) in one select store in each of some key cities. The following year, nine Cupboards were operating in such stores as Stix, Baer & Fuller in St. Louis, and Jordan Marsh in Florida.

1971

Hammacher Schlemmer opened a retail outlet in Whiteplains, New York, to sell Invento products.

1975

Gulf & Western purchased Hammacher Schlemmer.

1978

Hammacher Schlemmer & Company produced and mailed seven catalogues this year. More than half its customers used the catalogues to order by mail. Hammacher Schlemmer's annual sales volume, according to the Washington Star, was approximately \$15 million in 1978.

1980

The Bradford Exchange, headed by J. Roderick MacArthur, purchased Hammacher Schlemmer from Gulf & Western for an undisclosed sum.

Owners

Throughout the years, Hammacher Schlemmer has had about a dozen owners. Following is a list of the principal owners and the years they took over the company.

- 1848 William Tollner
- 1859 William Tollner and Alfred Hammacher
- 1867 William Tollner, Alfred Hammacher, William Schlemmer
- 1883 Alfred Hammacher and William Schlemmer
- 1898 Alfred Hammacher, William Schlemmer and William F. Schlemmer
- 1916 William F. Schlemmer
- 1945 Else F. O. Schlemmer, widow of William F. Schlemmer
- 1953 A syndicate headed by Henry Broido
- 1955 A syndicate headed by John Gerald
- 1960 Chester H. Roth, chairman of Kayser-Roth Corporation
- 1975 Gulf & Western Industries, Inc.
- 1980 The Bradford Exchange – J. Roderick MacArthur

Locations

Hammacher Schlemmer, or its predecessor companies, have made its headquarters at the following locations in New York City:

221 The Bowery	1848 – 1859
209 The Bowery	1859 – 1904
13 th Street & Fourth Avenue	1904 – 1926
147 E. 57 th Street	1926 - present

Firsts

Hammacher Schlemmer has always been an innovator. It was one of the first stores to use electrical lights. During the civil War, it was one of the first shops to issue "Rebellion Tokens". It was one of the first businesses to install the telephone and a pioneer in delivery of purchases to customers by automobile. Because Hammacher Schlemmer is always receptive to new products offered by inventors and small manufacturers, it is frequently the first retail outlet to offer new, often unproven products. Following are some of the products which were first sold at Hammacher Schlemmer. Many of these became well known and even commonplace:

Waring blender
Electric razor
Stainless steel kitchenware
Portable radio
Microwave ovens
Electric can opener
Mr. Coffee Machine
Schick Razor
Salton Hotray
Home freezer
Mechanical ice crusher
Plug-in intercom
Card Shuffler
Martini mixer
Battery-operated radio
Battery- operated toothbrush

Royalty, Presidents, Political Leaders, Movie and Entertainment Celebrities

Hammacher Schlemmer has always been a favorite place to shop for visiting royalty, presidents, movie stars and numerous wealthy big shots and aristocrats. Store officials usually demur when asked what a particular celebrity purchased and the clerks are careful about what they reveal. However, from time to time, numerous items have appeared in the press about which star bought what item at Hammacher Schlemmer.

Following is a list of royalty who have been to the store. If possible, we have noted when they were at the store and what they purchased:

- The Duke of Windsor, collection of unusual corkscrews
- The Duchess of Windsor, yearly visits from 1930s through 1975
- Princess Margaret
- Lord Snowdon
- The Queen Mother (Elizabeth I) in 1953, picture frames and candle sticks

- King Hassan of Morocco, who spent \$28,000 in an after-hours shopping spree. He purchased a half-scale replica of a Model T Ford, a hot dog cart and other items.
- The Shah of Iran
- The Saudi Family of Saudi Arabia, in the 1970s
- Princess Grace of Monaco, in the 1960s and 1970s
- The King and Queen of Spain, in the Spring of 1980

The following Political and Governmental leaders visited the Hammacher Schlemmer store on East 57th Street:

- ❖ Herbert C. Hoover, throughout the 1930s
- ❖ Franklin D. Roosevelt and Mrs. Roosevelt in the 1930s and 1940s
- ❖ Harry S. Truman
- ❖ Dwight D. Eisenhower, purchased a Nothing Box for \$25
- ❖ John f. Kennedy, Jackie and many of the Kennedy clan
- ❖ Lyndon B. Johnson and Ladybird Johnson
- ❖ Richard M. Nixon and wife Patricia, who purchased accessories for White House closets
- ❖ India Prime Minister Indira Gandhi in the 1970s
- ❖ J. Edgar Hoofer, in 1939 purchased a cheese set, cutlery an champagne taps
- ❖ Nelson Rockefeller
- ❖ Secretary of State Henry Kissinger

Members of the following wealthy families also shopped at Hammacher Schlemmer:

- Mrs. Vincent Astor
- Agelli family of Italy, owners of fiat
- Chrysler family
- Du Pont family
- The Fords
- Howard Hughes, in the 1930s
- The Mellon family
- The Motts
- The Morgan family
- The Rockefellers; David, Lawrence, Nelson and others
- R. J. Reynolds
- The Vanderbilts

The following stars of cinema and stage and celebrities also either visited the store or ordered something by phone or via the mails:

- The Beatles, purchased hundreds of Nothing boxes
- Ingrid Bergman
- David Brenner
- Yul Brynner
- Alexander Calder, piano wire for mobiles
- Jill Clayburgh, shot a movie scene in front of Hammacher Schlemmer in April, 1980
- Joan Crawford
- Greta Garbo
- Katherine Hepburn, a custom-built table
- Jerry Lewis
- Anthony Quinn
- Frank Sinatra in the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s
- Cicely Tyson